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ABSTRACT

Reading is comprehension, it is a complex network of interrelated skills, and it involves several levels of thinking, but in a holistic rather than in a molecular response to the text. The practice of reading based on this theoretical understanding involves identifying levels of comprehension; noting that levels of comprehending are not strictly sequential, discrete entities but reflect a change of emphasis; and noting that readability is linked to the interaction of reader, purpose, task, and text. An effective reader needs to be able to recognize words and combine them, recognize and comprehend lengthy and complex units of meaning, be able to read at different rates for different tasks, be able to comprehend meaning in various print texts, obtain meaning at levels beyond the literal, understand reading strategies, and understand reading as a source of pleasure and personal fulfillment. Practice in reading instruction should include a variety of methods and groupings, including individual/group reading and discussion, the class listening to and discussing material read to them by the teacher, and individual/group work on how to process factual information. (TJ)

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COMPREHENDING COMPREHENSION : CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

George Livingstone

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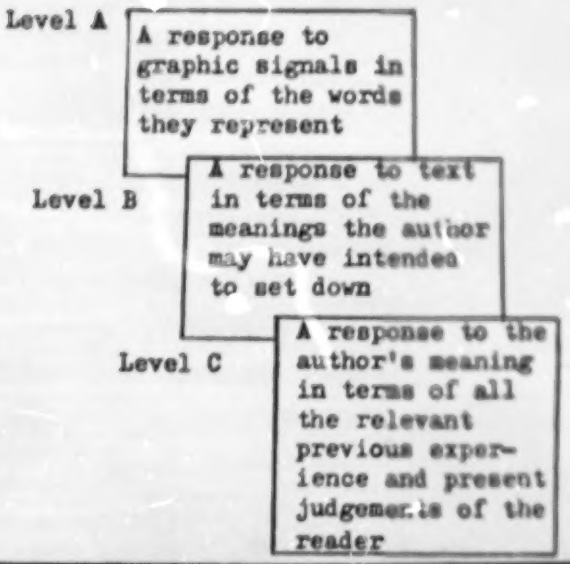
Lewin once said "There is nothing so practical as good theory". I believe that and I was reminded of it the other day, when for the first time (to my face), I was called "a theorist". I don't think it was meant as an insult but I had to think about it before deciding that it was probably a back-handed compliment. It served to remind me of that most unfortunate of all educational dichotomies - that chasm between theory and practice which exists or seems to exist, or which is created for whatever purpose. The dichotomy is as pertinent in the field of the teaching of reading as it would seem to be elsewhere in education. In this paper I hope above all else to bridge the gap, to marry theory to practice, to show how they can be brought together.

Fuelling my endeavours are two very basic beliefs - when a teacher understands what she is doing and why, the effectiveness of her teaching is improved. In other words, understanding the nature of what is to be taught will provide necessary guidance and structure her teaching. Associated with this belief is another which I hold just as firmly. I believe that what can be learned ought to be taught; things which can be learned ought to be taught and not left to whim or chance. These two beliefs mean that in the field of the teaching of reading I hold that there are certain key concepts about the nature of the reading process (the theory) which are worth understanding, understandable in practical terms and which will guide the development of programmes of teaching. The ultimate test of the theory is for me in terms of its operability in classrooms.

I fully realise the breadth of the task to be encompassed within this one paper but believe that the effort is very necessary and potentially very useful. The structure of this paper will therefore be firstly to examine the fundamental nature of the reading process, then to move on to look at certain key linking concepts (between theory and practice), thence to proceed to list the needs of the effective reader (the objectives of a reading programme) and finally to recommend practices which would attain these objectives and mention relevant materials.

1. What is reading?

Depending on the answer to this question is the fate of all else which follows. Examination of "the literature" reveals wide variations in the answers to this question. In the diagram which follows, imagine that the three squares are, in fact, a series of overlays which have simply been prised apart for purposes of dissection only. In reality they are interconnected and almost inextricable one from the other.


Level A
A response to graphic signals in terms of the words they represent
Level B
A response to text in terms of the meanings the author may have intended to set down
Level C
A response to the author's meaning in terms of all the relevant previous experience and present judgements of the reader

A. "Reading is a series of word perceptions." (Spache)

B. "Reading is a complex process by which the reader reconstructs, to some degree, a message encoded in graphic language." (Goodman)

C. "Reading involves the same sort of organisation and analytic action as occurs in thinking of higher sorts." (Thorndike)

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What answers does this diagram present?

(i) Reading involves a response to text. "To read is to respond" (Bullock). The response always involves the striving for comprehension. Reading is comprehension or understanding. Reading is, thus, thinking in the context of reading.

(ii) Reading is not a simple process of graphic (visual) input and phonological output. Reading is a complex network of inter-related skills and experiences. It is a "mental" activity, not solely one of visual perception.

(iii) There are, however, different levels (or phases) involved in the act of reading. These levels are not in any real way discrete. Reading is a holistic rather than a molecular response to text.

2. Which concepts make this definition operable?

To realise that reading is comprehending and thus involves thinking is important. To act upon such realisation is another matter. Fortunately there are several key concepts and important findings which can provide a framework for classroom operability.

Firstly, there are the taxonomies of Bloom (1956) and of Barrett (1968). Bloom's Taxonomy (Cognitive Domain) is concerned with levels of learning tasks generally. Barrett's work is more specific to reading and is based on the notion of the level of thinking required to make a full response to any reading task. Basically Barrett identifies four such levels of comprehension (literal; reorganisational; inferential and evaluative). Whilst these taxonomies are both hypothetical constructs, they are very useful and practical (Bloom has also been supported by some research findings). The notion of levels of thinking involved in reading tasks is a thoroughly serviceable organising principle. It runs throughout all that follows.

Secondly, there are various research findings from the field of developmental psychology. In the area of thinking we are familiar with Piaget's developmental stages in thinking. In terms of these stages one would expect that children of primary school age would, in the main, be capable of coping only with the first two of Barrett's levels (literal and reorganisational). Certainly, the majority of readers in schools seem to coincide with such a notion! Peel has some findings in the area of reading which would seem to support the notion that it is not until the age of 13 or 14 years that children are capable of dealing properly with ideas which involve competing possibilities and probabilities rather than those which involve the here and now. Whilst acknowledging the importance of such findings, there are cautionary notes to be added. In the first place, such findings do not mean that only 13 or 14 year olds can cope with such matters (nor do they mean that all 13/14 year olds can do so). Such an interpretation of developmental stages is far too rigid to be realistic; it also goes well beyond Piaget's intent. When Piaget's work is examined directly, it can be seen that his model of learning is an interaction model and this means that development takes place by interaction between learner and environment. In other words, development occurs through learners moving moving on from their existing predominant stage towards "the other stages" (the basic concept of dissonance applies). From this interpretation and from my own experience, children throughout the primary school can cope with all of Barrett's levels, though certain caveats on reader, task and text have to be borne in mind. This point will be resumed in the next set of linking concepts.

Before going on to the final set of concepts, it may be worthwhile summarising what has been said so far.

(i) Reading is comprehending and is a complex process.

(ii) The notion of levels of comprehension can usefully be applied as an organising principle.

(iii) These levels of comprehending (thinking) must not be seen as strictly sequential, discrete entities. Instead, they reflect a change of emphasis or balance in the reading tasks.

The final set of concepts incorporates the caveats mentioned above and primarily concerns those elements involved in the different levels of comprehension of textual materials. These four elements are, reader, purpose, task (or question) and text. A great deal of what has been written and said about the teaching of reading has fallen into the trap of examining only one of these elements. For example, readability formulae measure, to a degree, the difficulty of the text, but such measures are meaningless unless one considers the reader, the purpose and the task. Difficulty really results from an interaction of reader, purpose, task and text. A look at the permutation of reader, purpose, task and text which occur even in the following brief lists will reveal the need to look at these elements in a holistic way.

Reader	Purpose	Task	Text
Student 9-year old Businessman Joiner	Pass-time Pass an exam. Find information Appreciation	Discuss Write about Make notes Report on	Newspaper Paperback Learned journal or report Magazine

Thus, the joiner might read the newspaper to find information in order to write it down. The 9-year old child might read the paperback in order to appreciate it and discuss it in class. The list also gives an indication as to what readers may be required to be able to do. In other words, it reveals the elements which have to be considered within the reading programme and which the teacher has to be able to vary to meet these needs fully.

Before going on to the needs of the effective reader I would wish to stress two very important linked issues arising from this list. The importance of establishing appropriate purposes for reading - and setting tasks appropriate to these purposes - cannot be overstated. Some recent findings (Marton and Saljo) reveal how even mature, intelligent readers are much less effective than they might be because of a blinkered conception of what was required in reading. Many proved capable of reading only for recall of detail! Treatment did prove to be at least partly effective in these cases. A very important message for teachers!

3. What the effective reader needs to be able to do.

a. Recognise words and combine them fluently and with speed.

b. Recognise and comprehend increasingly lengthier and more complex units of meaning.

c. Cope with the demands of reading at different rates for different purposes.

d. Cope with the demands of comprehending meaning in various print contexts (both in and out of school).

e. Cope with the demands of obtaining meaning at levels beyond the literal or manifest in different contexts.

f. Understand the strategies he uses in his reading.

g. Understand that reading is a source of pleasure and personal fulfillment.

My own experience and information from recent studies and surveys suggests that schools cope fairly well with (a) and (b) and beyond that the adequacy of teaching declines appreciably. Greater effort is required; renewed understandings of needs are necessary; more thorough examinations of reading programmes are vital; different materials and levels of provision are inescapable. The task of meeting these needs rests ultimately with the teacher. Perhaps the greatest present deficit occurs at (g). How often do we see children who <u>can</u> read (at least in terms of (a) and (b)) but who <u>don't</u> read?

So, to meet these needs, variety of practices and activities is required and more extensive reading materials are essential.

4. Appropriate practices and materials.

Throughout all of these suggestions there is the overriding need to have children "respond with alertness" in a variety of ways and in varied groupings.

(i) Individual/group reading to improve skills at literal and reorganisational levels (reading laboratories, basal readers, etc.).

(ii) Group reading and discussion of passages with tasks (questions) which are designed to take children beyond the literal level of comprehension - with teacher involvement.

(iii) Supported individual reading of fiction - at all levels.

(iv) Group reading and discussion of shared reading of fiction - with teacher involved.

(v) Group reading and discussion of prediction exercises - with teacher involved.

(vi) Individual/group work on learning how to process factual information in the contexts of projects or topics - teacher-organised.

(vii) Class listening to and discussing a book read to them by the teacher.

Obviously, not all of these would occur all of the time. What is important is that each receive its due place in the programme. The practices outlined could become a skeleton upon which a check-list of provision could be based. The centrality of the teacher is clear as is the need for good planning and organisation on a school-wide basis. Only by good practice can good theory become effective.

One final point is worth making and it refers not only to the practices above, but to the overall theory. Reading is one aspect of a language programme. Obvious and intentionally included in the list of practices above are other aspects of language work. Such a reading programme would mean that the various aspects of language (reading, speaking, writing, listening) come together meaningfully and link effectively.

Summary

1. Reading is thinking i.e. the striving to comprehend.

2. Comprehension can take different forms and levels. This notion is important in guiding practice.

3. Reading is a holistic act. Cognisance must be taken of all elements comprising the totality.

4. Effective readers need to be able to undertake a variety of tasks.

5. Practices must reflect the needs of the effective reader.

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